

agricultural situation

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PRODUCTION COSTS: CROP BY CROP



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Ask a group of farmers about production costs, and they're likely to respond, "too high." But that's where the agreement probably ends, since no two farmers dole out exactly the same amount.

Likewise, ask a group of economists how to estimate farm production costs, and you're sure to raise some thorny questions. What price, for example, do you put on operator and family labor? Do you use purchase prices or depreciation charges to compute farm machinery costs?

Despite considerable difference of opinion, one thing is clear. As farming becomes more complex and as growing numbers of U.S. farmers depend on only one or two crops for their livelihood, it's important to know what it costs to produce our food and fiber on a *commodity basis*.

Who uses the figures? Farmers, first of all. Production costs are an essential ingredient in planning a profitable mix of commodities and in making all the other management decisions that go into the business of a well-run farm.

Economists use cost of production data to measure farm production efficiency and pinpoint areas that need correction. And legislators and policymakers rely increasingly on this information to evaluate proposed programs and enact effective farm policy.

Congress responded to these needs in 1973 when it passed the

Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act, which directed the Secretary of Agriculture to determine the average cost of producing wheat, corn and other feed grains, cotton, and dairy products, and to update the estimates annually.

To comply with this Act, USDA's Economic Research Service recently released estimates of what it cost farmers in 1974 to produce cotton, corn, grain sorghum, barley, and wheat. Also included were estimates for soybeans, peanuts, and flaxseed since these rank as major competing crops. Data on dairy costs are forthcoming.

SRS enumerators collected raw data for the analysis in early 1975, when they interviewed roughly 6,000 producers across the country. Their questions covered the gamut from basic inputs to cropping practices and land values.

Using information gathered from each farm, economists made national and regional cost estimates for each crop, figuring "variable" expenses, including *direct costs* like seed, fertilizer, custom services, and irrigation; *management costs*; and *overhead costs*, such as taxes and insurance.

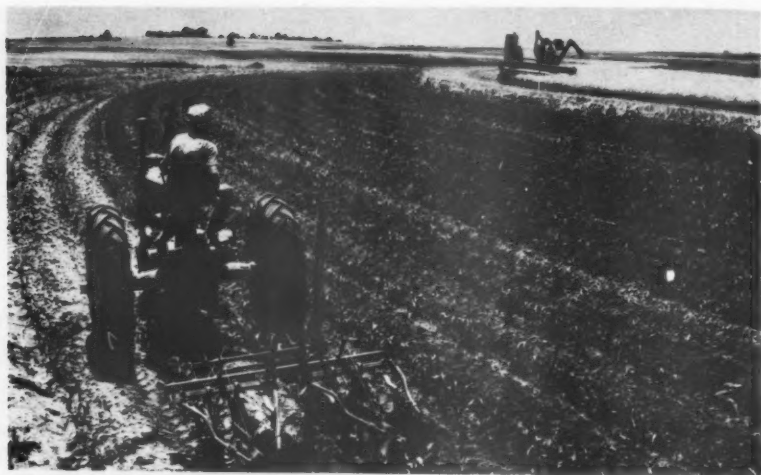
Land costs were calculated separately in six different ways. One method assigned current market values to owned land, while another used the value at the time the land was bought.

For rented land, economists estimated costs based on cash rent payments or on arrangements where rent is based on a share of the crop. Two additional methods covered producers who farmed both owned and rented land.

During 1974, adverse weather slashed yields for several major crops. Coupled with accelerated farm input prices, this meant heftier costs for each bushel and pound produced. Here are some of the year's highlights...

Cotton. Farmers paid an average of \$187 an acre, or \$219 a bale,





excluding land, to produce cotton in 1974. Direct costs alone consumed \$166 of this amount, led by outlays for seed, fertilizer, insecticides, herbicides, and other chemicals, which claimed \$51 an acre.

On a per pound basis, costs averaged 33½ cents, with nearly four-fifths of the crop produced at a direct cost of less than 40 cents a pound.

Adding in the land's share of costs, cotton producers spent 41 cents a pound when land value was estimated at purchase price, to just over 48 cents based on current land values.

Harsh weather cut 70 pounds from the usual yield of 480 pounds of lint per acre. With "normal" yields, total costs at current land values would have averaged 40 cents a pound.

Corn. Producers put out \$32 an acre for fertilizer and \$28 for power and equipment to produce the Nation's corn crop. Management and overhead added another \$23, bringing total costs, excluding land, to \$120. Depending on land allocation, total outlays ran from \$153 to \$206 an acre.

Unusually low yields pushed per-bushel costs up in the \$2.06-\$2.77 range. But had yields matched the projected 98-bushel average based on the 1954-69 trend, expenses might have tallied only \$1.80 a bushel.

Grain sorghum. Farmers working their own land—valued at purchase price—paid roughly \$87 to produce an acre of grain sorghum in 1974, versus around \$110 for those farming on a net share basis.

Total direct costs averaged \$59 an acre, or \$1.34 a bushel, with overhead and management tacking on another \$14. Growers turned out 80 percent of the crop at a direct cost of less than \$1.75 a bushel, and nearly 95 percent for less than \$2.50.

Barley. Depending on land allocation, growers paid from \$71 to \$89 to produce an acre of barley. Total costs, excluding land, worked out to \$57 an acre, or \$1.59 a bushel.

Uncooperative weather in 1974 shaved yields to about 36 bushels an acre, versus the trend yield of 43, driving up costs as much as 30 to 40 cents a bushel.

Wheat. Even though 1974 brought a record wheat crop, bad weather forced average yields to only 27½ bushels—the smallest since 1967.

The broad range of expenses incurred by growers of different types of wheat in different regions generated total costs ranging from \$71 to \$95 an acre, or \$2.64 to \$3.51 a bushel. Land costs ranged from a high of \$40 an acre (\$1.50 a bushel) at current market values, to only \$18 (70 cents a bushel) based on purchase price.

Soybeans. Costs veered sharply among survey subregions and even from one farm to another in the same areas. Average fertilizer and lime outlays, for instance, ranged from a low of 91 cents to as much as \$22 per acre. Total costs, excluding land, worked out to \$69 an acre, or about \$2.80 a bushel.

Taking land costs into account, just over half the crop was produced for less than \$4.50 a bushel, based on price at time of purchase. But less than a third of the soybean crop cost less than \$4.50 a bushel using current land values.

Flaxseed. Researchers did not make national estimates for this crop since data were gathered from only two areas spanning parts of Minnesota, and North and South Dakota, which account for over half the U.S. crop.

Total costs per bushel, excluding land, ranged from just under \$5 to nearly \$6.40, while per acre outlays varied from \$42 to \$55 between the two survey areas.

Peanuts. In the two regions surveyed, producers paid roughly \$9 in total nonland costs to produce 100 pounds of peanuts in 1974. Seed alone claimed about \$40 an acre, driving total costs, excluding land, to over \$260 an acre—sharply higher than the other two oilseeds.



HEADING OFF THE 'HOPPER

The destructive ways of a lot of hungry grasshoppers may soon come to an end. Even now the pesky insect is eating itself to death in experiments by USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS).

Behind it all is a parasite called *Nosema locustae*, which roughly translated means "grasshopper sickness." This little creature is sprayed onto wheat bran that's dropped from an airplane across grasshopper-infested fields. Grasshoppers feast on the tasty bran and

the parasite at the same time. Then, the *Nosema* feeds on the insect's fat and multiplies, eventually killing the grasshopper.

The 3-year study—the biggest of its kind to date—involves nearly 100,000 acres. About half of this will be treated with the bran and parasite. A fourth will be sprayed with insecticide and an untreated fourth will serve as a check.

By spreading *Nosema* under controlled conditions, scientists hope to trim the grasshopper population to a size we can cope with. Already the ARS team has chalked up a 75-percent success rate on some *Nosema*-treated fields. The next few years should tell, say researchers, who expect sharply fewer grasshoppers on the treated fields.

Maintaining this destructive insect at tolerable levels will cut forage losses. More forage will feed more cattle, which could translate into larger beef supplies. And stabilizing the cattle-carrying capacity of our rangelands could be a step toward leveling off beef prices.

ARS researchers gave *Nosema* the nod over other, even more deadly, pathogens for a couple of reasons. First, it's easy to use since it adapts to standard application methods. And as a natural enemy of the grasshopper, *Nosema* often kills up to 90 percent of the insects it contacts.

To make the toxic bran, lettuce coated with *Nosema* is fed to grasshoppers. Then the diseased insects are ground, mixed with water, and sprayed onto the wheat bran. One infected grasshopper produces enough *Nosema* to treat 2 acres.

Compared with chemical insecticides, *Nosema*-treated bran takes top honors in controlling grasshoppers. Unlike chemicals, the parasite only attacks grasshoppers and certain crickets. It's also safer for people and doesn't build up a resistance level in the insect. Besides that, *Nosema* lasts much longer and costs roughly 75 percent less than its chemical counterpart.

CROPS 1975: OUTPUT CLIMBED...

Perhaps in the midst of a new planting season it isn't wise to be looking over a shoulder at the production achievements notched a year earlier. It might be too easy to make wishful projections for the coming crop. After all, the record setting pace of 1975 came on the heels of the 1974 slump which followed the outstanding 1973 season.

The new production marks in 1975 can be laid to increased acreages rather than recordbreaking yields—only soybeans among the major commodities hit a new yield record. Principal crops were planted or grown on 333 million acres last year, up 1 percent from 1974. Major increases occurred for winter and durum wheat, rice, and soybeans. Harvested area expanded 2 percent to total 325 million acres. Producers harvested increased acreages of corn, sorghum, oats, barley, winter and durum wheat, rice, popcorn, soybeans, sugar crops, tobacco, and hay.

The Crop Reporting Board keeps track of each season's production and matches it against previous years. The comparison showed 1975 with a reading 11 percent better than 1974 and 2 percent above the outstanding 1973 effort.

Not bad for a year that got underway with a soggy planting season that had farmers concerned for the second consecutive year. But once the weather opened, farmers picked up the planting pace and pulled ahead of 1974 and progress during average years.

By November, harvest progress for corn, soybeans, and sorghum was ahead of 1974 and normal.

The corn crop last year topped all previous efforts with a harvest of nearly 5.8 billion bushels, a gain of 24 percent from 1974. Yields jumped 15 bushels per acre to a national

average of 86. Illinois led all States with an average of 116 bushels.

Soybean farmers hauled more than 1.5 billion bushels from the fields. This was the second largest crop and was spurred on by a record yield of 28.4 bushels. Illinois, alone, produced about one-fifth of the U.S. crop.

Winter wheat production hit a new level above 1.65 billion bushels, 19 percent more than in 1974. This was the third consecutive improved production mark and reflected increased acreages and good yields. The durum crop of 123 million bushels was the best ever, and other spring wheat brought in 359 million bushels.

The 1975 hay harvest was the second best on the books with 133 million tons, 5 percent over a year earlier.

Cotton farmers saw a 28-percent slip in output last year. The 8.3 million bales came from 28 percent fewer acres than a year before and yields only held steady.

...AS VALUE FELL

While 1975 brought record harvests and an 11-percent jump in overall crop production, it was less kind to crop values. Total value of the 1975 harvest worked out to \$55.7 billion, down 1 percent from 1974's record \$56.4 billion. Here's what a few of our major crops meant for U.S. farmers during the past 2 years...

Crop	1974	1975
<i>Million dollars</i>		
Corn	14,122	14,382
Sorghum	1,743	1,787
Oats	933	955
Wheat	7,338	7,435
Rice	1,261	1,115
Soybeans	8,070	7,044
Hay	5,827	6,513
Potatoes	1,360	1,520
Tobacco	2,160	2,230
Cotton	2,374	1,949

SURVEYSCOPE

To give our readers a clearer picture of the vast scope of SRS activities, *Agricultural Situation* presents a series of articles on special surveys undertaken in various States. While these are not national surveys, they are important to the agriculture in individual States.

"Last year, our rice crop came to over 40 million hundred-weight—nearly double production levels of just a few years ago," claims Carrol Spencer, Statistician in Charge of the Arkansas Crop and Livestock Reporting Service.

"Output in 1975 climbed 22 percent over the previous high a year earlier, marking the third straight year that production shattered all records."

Every November, Spencer's office conducts an Acreage and Production Survey, which reveals how many acres were planted and harvested, average yield per acre, and total pro-

duction. This updates forecasts released monthly since August. Another survey also determines how much rice is stored on farms throughout Arkansas, the Nation's No. 1 rice State.

Information from rice growers throughout the State is collected by length of grain—long, medium, or short. Long grain varieties accounted for 72 percent of the harvest, and medium grains, 23 percent. Production of short grains increased 166 percent last year, but still mustered only 5 percent of Arkansas' total output.

"Estimates by length of grain find



Growers and other rice industry people depend on Arkansas' annual rice survey . . .

wide use among farmers, farm organizations, agribusiness, and the government," says Spencer. "The rice industry, for example, relies on our figures to determine values for each class. And USDA's Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service uses the data to calculate loan rates based on average production by length, as required under the price support program.

"We begin our survey by mailing questionnaires to a selected sample of rice growers located throughout the State. Enumerators either phone or visit all growers who fail to respond by mail.

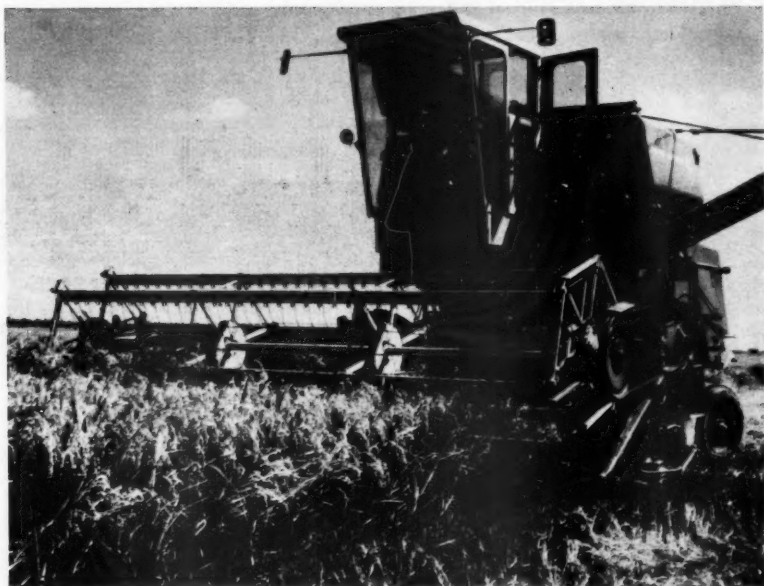
"Responses are obtained from 96 percent of the producers receiving a questionnaire. The few not responding generally are out of the State during the survey period, have changed address, don't have a telephone, or cannot be contacted for some other reason."

Survey teams contact many of the same growers again on the first days

of January, April, and August to find out how much rice is stored on Arkansas farms. As of January 1, farm stocks stood at 6½ million hundred-weight, up 28 percent from a year earlier. Another 18 million hundred-weight of rough rice were stored in mills, elevators, and warehouses across the State. Total Arkansas rice stocks, at 24½ million hundred-weight, came out 13 percent higher than the 21½ million stored a year earlier.

"The Crop Reporting Board in Washington summarizes results from our rice production and stocks surveys—along with data from the five other major rice producing States—in its December Crop Production report, Annual Crop Summary, and in its quarterly Rice Stocks releases," explains Spencer.

"And, of course, we publish figures for Arkansas in our regular State crop production and rice stocks reports. Evaluation of this information helps the industry adjust to changing market conditions."



... for data on acreage, yields, production, and stocks—on a length-of-grain basis.

FIRST-TIME COUNT: PUERTO RICO'S FARM WORKERS

Last year, about the time when vacationers were beginning their annual migration to the beaches of Puerto Rico, SRS enumerators, deep in the island's interior, were collecting data on the Puerto Rican farm labor force.

SRS has been keeping track of farm labor numbers in the United States since 1909, but this marked its first venture into Puerto Rico for that purpose. And that posed some unique problems, according to Larry Dell, the Washington-based statistician who coordinated the project.

First, there was the language barrier: outside of the cities and tourist areas, virtually no one spoke English, least of all the farmers tucked away in remote stretches of the island; nor did Dell speak Spanish.

That meant that survey questionnaires and other materials had to be translated into Spanish, and further complicated the task of hiring 30

local enumerators who would do the actual survey work. Training the enumerators required the aid of an able translator—a job largely filled by Pedro Cancel, a native Puerto Rican who served as the project's supervisory enumerator.

But before Cancel and the other members of the survey team headed out to get the farm labor information they wanted, a special survey had to be run in October to identify farm operators within roughly 120 selected land segments across the island.

Unlike the United States, where farm labor information is collected from a sample of farm operators identified in previous survey work, the Puerto Rican team didn't have the "luxury" of an established survey sample.

And since large numbers of Puerto Rican farmers are located off regular mailing routes and lack telephones, the 30 enumerators had to travel from farm to farm to collect survey data entirely by personal interview.

For survey purposes, Puerto Rico was divided into five main areas, with five to six enumerators covering each section. The survey team contacted roughly 600 farm operators to inquire about people employed on their farms during the week of October 12-18.

SRS released survey findings early this year in reports published both in Spanish and English. During the October survey week, the work force on Puerto Rican farms totaled 46,000—roughly 10 percent of the agricultural labor force employed in the U.S.

Sugarcane laborers formed the largest single group of agricultural workers. Other workers employed on Puerto Rico's 25,000 to 30,000 farms produced coffee, tobacco, pineapple, and a host of other fruits and vegetables. Cattle farms, dairy farms, and broiler operations also provided a substantial number of agricultural jobs.

A full 41,000, or nine-tenths of the total labor force, worked as field and livestock hands, with packers, machine operators, farm supervisors, and others rounding out the agricultural labor force.

The average hired worker put in just over 29 hours during the survey week. Wages, regardless of payment method, converted to an average hourly rate of \$1.48, compared with \$2.63 in the continental United States.

Workers paid by the hour in only cash wages took in an average of \$1.54 an hour, while field and livestock workers earned \$1.42 for all types of payment converted to an hourly rate.

SRS surveyed Puerto Rico's farm labor force at the request of the U.S. Department of Labor, which needed to know both numbers and kinds of agricultural workers. The Labor Department will use the data as a basis for apportioning funds set aside by Congress to help migrant workers in the United States and Puerto Rico.



This Puerto Rican farmer was one of roughly 600 operators contacted in SRS's first survey of the island's agricultural labor force. Below Pedro Cancel explains the project to another survey participant.



AGRICULTURE'S TOP MARKETS

Grain sales to the Soviet Union may frequently dominate the headlines, but the Russians aren't anywhere near the biggest customer for U.S. farm products.

The Soviets, in fact, rank a distant 14th among our top 15 agricultural export markets, ahead of only Egypt. During fiscal 1975, the 15 markets combined purchases two-thirds of total U.S. farm exports valued at \$21.6 billion.

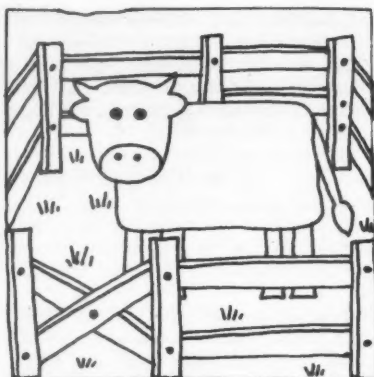
Japan has long ranked as the No. 1 market, and a 5-percent drop in the value of U.S. exports to that nation was not enough to jar it from its first place spot.

The Netherlands, another steady customer, moved up a notch to second place with purchases (unadjusted for transshipments) valued at \$1.6 billion. Stepped-up

Here's a look at the top 15 markets and what they spent during 1974/75 for goods produced on U.S. farms.*

Country	Feed grains and wheat	Total
<i>Million dollars</i>		
Japan	1,557	3,185
Netherlands	688	1,631
W. Germany	496	1,448
Canada	119	1,312
South Korea	425	885
Mexico	488	851
Italy	365	804
Spain	359	790
India	660	759
Iran	357	757
United Kingdom	142	583
France	39	454
China (Taiwan)	104	410
USSR	352	396
Egypt	188	388
Total, 15 countries	6,339	14,653

*Data not adjusted for transshipments.



TURNABOUT IN FEEDLOT TOTALS

Since the count began in 1962, cattle feedlots have dwindled in number but grown in size. Not so last year. And that "first" was just one of several turnabouts recorded in SRS's Cattle on Feed report in January.

The first change came with a very slight upswing in the number of small feedlots. Operations with capacities of less than 1,000 head climbed from 135,815 in 1974 to 136,262 in 1975.

Credit for another first—a rise in the total number of cattle feedlots—goes to that fractional increase in small feedlot numbers. All U.S. feedlot operations penciled out to 138,026 last year, compared with 137,737 in 1974.

In a final reversal, the latest tally pointed to a downturn in the number of the very largest feedlots. Those operations boasting a capacity of 32,000 head or more dropped from 73 in 1974 to 66 last year. Most of the decline occurred in Texas. In fact, all feedlots with capacities of 1,000 or more slipped 8 percent last year to 1,764. Even with the cutback in numbers on feed, these larger operations still claimed nearly two-thirds of 1975's cattle marketings, as they did the previous 2 years.

Briefings

RECENT REPORTS BY USDA OF ECONOMIC, MARKETING, AND RESEARCH DEVELOPMENTS AFFECTING FARMERS.

PLENTY OF POPCORN . . . Stepped-up acreage and increased yields pushed the 1975 popcorn crop to 516 million pounds of shelled corn, according to SRS's Crop Reporting Board. This marked the first year that the Crop Reporting Board issued popcorn yield and production figures in terms of shelled corn rather than on an ear-corn basis, reflecting the rapid trend toward field shelling at harvesttime. Last year 82% of the crop was field shelled, up from 77% a year earlier, and 66% in 1973.

DOLLARS AND ACRES . . . Farmland values climbed another 12% per acre from November 1974 to November 1975, report USDA economists. While that's a much slower rate of increase than the previous year's 21%, it's still well above annual increases recorded before 1972. The Northern Plains and Corn Belt States posted the most rapid rates of increase with 5 States reporting farmland selling for at least 20% more than a year earlier. North Dakota topped all States with a 27% hike, while in most Southern States, farmland values appreciated less than 10%.

ON ONIONS . . . SRS's Crop Reporting Board estimated January 1 onion stocks held in common storage by growers and dealers in the 12 summer onion States and in cold storage throughout the U.S. at 4.2 million cwt., off 19 percent from the 1975 figure. Three-fourths of the summer onion States reported smaller common storage holdings ranging from 9% to 86% below last year. Shrink and loss up to January 1 reached above average due largely to the breakdown of immature onions in storage.

READING ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT . . . USDA's Rural Development Service recently released a bibliography covering much of the rural development literature published during the past 6 years. Called *Rural Development Literature, An Annotated Bibliography, 1969-75*, its roughly 350 citations span seven subject areas: fire and emergency services, health care delivery systems, sanitary services and sewage systems, manpower training and vocational education, public

recreational facilities and planning, local government structure and taxation, and rural housing. Aimed especially at community leaders, researchers, and rural development specialists, single copies of the publication are available free on request from the Information Staff, Rural Development Service, USDA, Washington, D.C. 20250.

CATTLE COMEDOWN . . . After climbing roughly 3 million head a year since 1967, the number of cattle and calves on U.S. farms at the start of this year dropped to 128 million, down nearly 4 million from January 1, 1975. Behind the downturn stood unusually heavy cow slaughter during 1975, which pushed the beef cow inventory to below year-earlier levels for the first time since 1958.

HONEY TALLY . . . Last year, it took 4.2 million bee colonies—1% less than in 1974—to produce 6% more honey. Total 1975 production, says SRS's Crop Reporting Board, came to 197 million pounds, as average yields rose just over 3 pounds per colony. Beeswax production totaled 3.4 million pounds, off 2% from 1974. Honey sales last year brought producers an average of 50.6 cents a pound—about the same as in 1974, when honey prices hit their highest level on record. Beeswax prices, on the other hand, dipped 12 cents a pound to \$1.02.

SAFETY FIRST . . . Last year, U.S. agricultural workers turned in a better employee safety record than the all-industry average, when measured by frequency of serious violations cited from inspections by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Inspections of just over 1,000 agricultural establishments revealed some 3,000 violations, but only 27 were deemed "serious," meaning there was a "substantial probability" that death or serious physical harm could result. The percentage of serious violations in agriculture amounted to slightly over half the all-industry rate of 1.43%.

FRENCH DILEMMA . . . "Corn in danger," ran the headline in a leading French farm journal. Reason for the alarm was fear that French corn plantings could not be maintained or increased without stepped-up support payments from both the French government and European Community. Following 4 years of peak corn yields and sharp gains in harvested area, corn area harvested in France dropped 3 out of 4 years during 1972 to 1975. This year is also expected to bring smaller plantings. Exceptionally good weather in 1976 could brighten the corn outlook in France, but experts with USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service say that expansion of French corn output is not likely to regain its lost momentum over the next several years.

Statistical Barometer

Item	1974	1975	1976—latest available data
Farm Food Market Basket:¹			
Retail cost (1967=100)	162	175	179 January
Farm value (1967=100)	178	187	186 January
Farmer's share of retail cost (percent)	43	42	40 January
Agricultural Trade:			
Agricultural exports (\$bil.)	22	22	2.0 January
Agricultural imports (\$bil.)	10	9	.8 January
Cattle Inventory, January 1:			
Cattle and calves (million head)	127.7	131.8	128.0
Value per head (\$) ²	293	159	190
Total value (\$mil.) ³	37,447	20,964	24,338
Cows and heifers that have calved (mil. head)	54.3	56.7	54.8
Beef cows (mil. head)	43.0	45.5	43.7
Milk cows (mil. head)	11.3	11.2	11.1
Heifers 500 pounds and over (mil. head)	19.0	19.5	18.6
For beef cow replacements (mil. head)	8.2	8.9	7.2
For milk cow replacements (mil. head)	3.9	4.1	4.0
Other heifers (mil. head)	6.8	6.5	7.4
Steers 500 pounds and over (mil. head)	17.8	16.4	17.2
Bulls 500 pounds and over (mil. head)	2.6	3.0	2.8
Heifers, steers, and bulls under 500 pounds (mil. head)	33.9	36.3	34.6
Livestock and Poultry on Farms, January 1:			
All livestock and poultry (1967=100)	114	116	112
Meat animals (1967=100)	114	116	112
Milk cattle (1967=100)	84	84	83
Poultry (1967=100)	95	87	87
Sheep and Lamb Inventory, January 1:			
All sheep and lambs (mil. head)	16.4	14.5	13.3
Value per head (\$) ³	33	30	37
Total value (\$mil.) ³	536	442	496
On feed (mil. head)	2.7	2.1	1.9
Stock sheep (mil. head)	13.7	12.4	11.5
New crop lambs ⁴	1.1	1.0	1.1

¹Average annual quantities per family and single person households bought by wage and clerical workers, 1960-61, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics figures.

²Preliminary.

³Based on reporters' estimates of average price per head in their localities.

⁴Includes all lambs born after September 30 the previous year that are on hand January 1. New crop lambs are not included in the sheep and lamb inventory estimates.

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